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GERMANY YEAR 90 NINE ZERO

★★★★

Directed and written by Jean-Luc Godard
 With Eddie Constantine, Hanns Zischler, Claudia Michelsen, Andre Labarthe, and Nathalie Kadem.

JLG BY JLG

★★★

Directed and written by Jean-Luc Godard
 With Godard, Andre Labarthe, and Bernard Eisenschitz.

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

GODARD TALKING TO HIMSELF

Like most of Jean-Luc Godard's recent work, *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* (1991) and *JLG by JLG* (subtitled *December Self-Portrait*, 1994) are annexes to his *Histoire(s) du cinema*, a work on video in multiple parts scheduled to premiere in its finished form at the Locarno film festival in Switzerland in early August. (Four portions of this video have already shown at the Film Center.) Like the various parts of *Histoire(s) du cinema*, these films (each about an hour long and being shown together at Facets Multimedia) are above all collections of carefully arranged quotations—interwoven anthologies of extracts from prose, poetry, philosophy, films, musical works, paintings. They differ from Godard's magnum opus in that they're films rather than videos and in their juxtaposition of quotations and exquisitely framed landscapes, German in *Germany* and Swiss in *JLG*. But like the videos they're more hermetic personal essays about the modern world than narratives in any ordinary sense. These rich tapestries of rumination essentially invite us to listen to Godard talking to himself, and they resemble each other in that they're probably the two most Germanic and melancholy films he's produced since the 60s.

Born in Paris to Swiss parents, Godard has maintained an ambiguous Franco-Swiss identity throughout his life (he's currently 64): in the 70s he moved back to the Geneva area, where he'd spent much of his childhood, though he still maintains an office in Paris. It's not entirely clear what sort of role German culture plays in his background, but he's



movies

often alluded in interviews to the fact that the German occupation of France occurred during his adolescence.

Germany Year 90 Nine Zero in particular harks back to Godard's *Alphaville* (1965)—the most Germanic by far of his 60s movies—by focusing on that movie's lead character, Lemmy Caution, played by the same actor, Eddie Constantine. Paradoxically Constantine is American by origin and French by association: born in Los Angeles, he was a protege of Edith Piaf and became a nightclub singer in Paris. In 1953 he began appearing in French action thrillers as Lemmy Caution, the hard-living American private-eye hero of Peter Cheyney mysteries. By the time Godard appropriated Constantine and his character for *Alphaville*—a SF pastiche shot in contemporary Paris but set in a distant galaxy—Caution was something of a camp cliché, but Godard used his weary machismo to suggest tragedy as well as parody. Shot in very-high-contrast black and white, *Alphaville* took shape as a complex meditation on the German

expressionist cinema of the 20s: it's densely packed with references to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Fritz Lang's Dr. Mabuse films and *Metropolis*, and F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*, *The Last Laugh*, and *Faust*, as well as subsequent expressionist works like Cocteau's *Orpheus*, Orson Welles's *The Trial*, and various American comic strips. In *Alphaville* Caution is a spy from the "outer lands" of contemporary culture, posing as a reporter for "Figaro-Pravda" (the "Times-Pravda" in the English-dubbed version), moving through the nightmarishly depersonalized, computerized labyrinth of Paris/*Alphaville* like a skeptical primitive, embodying nostalgic reactions and stances from popular culture. (A discarded subtitle for the movie was "Tarzan vs. IBM.")

A quarter of a century later Godard brings back Constantine's Caution, again as a spy, but now he's a forgotten mole in East Germany when the Berlin wall comes down—an anachronism who truly has no place to go. To some extent he's even more of a stand-in for Godard than

he was in the 60s, but it's a different Godard he's standing in for. No longer pretending in the same fashion to be a storyteller, and no longer tied so exclusively to cities, this Godard simply sets Caution loose in the German countryside and suburbs to gradually make his way to Berlin, plaintively asking everyone he encounters "Where is the West?" and receiving only blank stares. For Godard, the end of the cold war and the economic unification of Europe are occasions for mourning, not celebration—one of the first images we see in the film is a fallen Karl-Marx-Strasse street sign crushed under car wheels. And Caution is no longer campy or parodic; he's simply a piece of tragic wreckage, a witness rather than a mover and shaker. (Constantine died shortly after this film was shot, in his mid-70s, and Godard records his final performance with moving gravity.)

Aside from certain touchstones, like Sigmund Freud's "Dora" (one of his most famous cases) and Mozart's *Requiem*, the quotations and references in *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero*

are largely cinematic. The film's title alludes to Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (1947), set and shot in postwar Berlin, and the clips in Godard's film include some color footage from Eric von Stroheim's 1928 *The Wedding March*, shot in southern California but set in Vienna.

The references to German expressionist films also remind us of *Alphaville*, of course. As Lemmy Caution passes a bridge, the narrator says, "Once I was across the frontier, the shadows came to greet me"—a direct allusion to a famous intertitle in Murnau's *Nosferatu* ("When he reached the other side of the bridge, the phantoms came to greet him") that was praised by the father of surrealism, Andre Breton. At the end of *Germany*, Caution finally arrives at a Berlin hotel in a sequence that pointedly echoes the opening of *Alphaville*, when Caution arrives at a Paris hotel.

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film ratings

- ★★★★ Masterpiece
- ★★★ A must-see
- ★★ Worth seeing
- ★ Has redeeming facet
- Worthless